

Use of Employer Branding as a Tool for Attracting and Retaining Talent: Evidence from Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Botswana

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine how employer branding is used as a tool for attracting and retaining talent in private higher education institutions. Literature shows that employer brand is very important if well implemented and communicated in highlighting an institution as an attractive employment destination, that is, as an employment destination of choice. A structured questionnaire, that employed a five-point Likert scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree was used as a data collection instrument. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse and interpret data. Results of the study showed that private higher education institutions deploy a number of employer branding strategies to attract and retain talent. Furthermore, results also showed that biographical factors such as age and education are critical issues authorities in PHEIs should look at when designing, implementing and communicating their brands as these have an effect on how talent perceive the PHEIs as attractive workplaces as well as on how long talent will remain as an employee at the institutions.

Keywords: Talent, employer branding, private higher education institutions, employer branding strategies

1. Introduction

Employer branding is now considered a strategic practice that requires organisations to seriously pay attention to if they are to survive modern day talent wars. In this current competitive labour environment, the challenge for service-oriented organisations such as private higher education institutions is to differentiate themselves through employer branding in order to be able to successfully attract and retain talented staff (Knox & Bickerton, 2008; Knox & Maxwell, 2009). Employer branding ensures employer attractiveness (the envisioned benefits that current and prospective employees see in working for a particular company) and can be used as a tool for attracting and retaining talent (Berthon et al, 2005). The importance of employer branding is also confirmed by the fact that as a strategic practice, it is now gradually increasing in prominence in businesses (Berthon et al, 2010; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Ambler, 2000; Ewing et al, 2002; Lloyd, 2002; Sherry, 2000; Ritson, 2002). Due to the current cutthroat competition among employers to attract and retain talent requires, literature now shows that a paradigm shift in the employment behaviour and patterns of organisations as part of employer branding, is now urgently required (Osborn-Jones, 2001).

Literature also shows that effective employer branding can be significantly achieved if job products in organisations are customised to attract, develop and motivate employees in a way that satisfies their needs and wants (Gatewood et al, 1993) and also adequately communicated to the labour market for the purpose of attracting prospective employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Kalaijan, 2011). This is viewed as the essence of employer branding which should focus at providing a working atmosphere that both prospective and current employees value and find attractive (Berton et al, 2005; Vaijyanthi & shreenivasan, 2011). Companies with strong employer brands are viewed as being able to potentially reduce the cost of employee acquisition, improve employee relations, increase employee retention and even offer lower salaries for comparable talent than firms with weaker employer brands (Ritson, 2002 in Berthon et al, 2005).

2. Background to the study

There are over two hundred and seventy-six private tertiary institutions in Botswana of which only five are private higher education institutions. Private tertiary institutions are all those institutions that offer post secondary education, some up to diploma and others up to degree level. Staff members in these institutions have qualifications ranging from bachelors degree to PhD level. Only private tertiary institutions that offer post secondary education up to degree level are referred to as private higher education institutions in Botswana. Research shows that private higher education institutions face challenges in attracting and retaining staff. These institutions therefore require more creative strategies to address this issue hence the need for employer branding as one of the strategies.

3. Research problem

Observations with regards to staff mobility in private higher education institutions in Botswana show that these institutions face challenges in attracting and retaining talent. Recruitment reports in most of these institutions show that a number of top talent refuse to take up offers after getting the job while others stay for a short period and leave. This is confirmed in (Tertiary Education Council (TEC)-facilitated survey that showed that private higher education institutions face challenges when attracting top talent and hence government fears that these institutions may not be able to offer quality education in line with their claims (Varghese, 2006, TEC, 2005, TEC, 2006). Despite the above talent recruitment and retention challenges private higher education institutions face, there is no known research that has been conducted to examine the role of employer branding in the attraction and retention of talent in private higher education institutions. This research is therefore meant to fill the research gap.

4. Assumption

Employer branding has an impact on attracting and retaining of talent PHEIs.

5. Research Aim

To investigate the effect of employer branding on the attracting and retaining talent in PHEIs

6. Specific research objectives

- 6.1. To examine strategies used for implementing employer branding in PHEIs.
- 6.2. To determine whether there is a relationship between biographical variables of employees and the way they perceive the impact of employer branding as enhancing the attractiveness of PHEIs as employment destinations.
- 6.3. To determine whether there is a relationship between employee biographic variables and employer branding in terms of the intentions of employees to stay long at PHEIs.

7. Significance of the study: This study will:

- 7.1. Fill the research gap on the role of employer branding in assisting private higher education institutions attract and retaining talent.
- 7.2. Contribute to the enrichment of the body of knowledge on the impact of employer branding in the attraction and retention of talent in private higher education institutions.

8. Literature review

8.1. *The concept of employer branding*

Employer brand is the perception the world has about a company as a good place to work at (TTI, 2010). It is the perception of a company as a great place to work in the eyes of current and potential employees (Tuzner & Yuksel, 2009; Berton et al, 2005; Berthon et al, 2010). Employer brand can also be defined as the employer attractiveness, that is, envisioned benefits that potential and current employees see in working for a specific organisation (Berton et al, 2005) and also as a total package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by an employment experience (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). The above is also extended by Mosley (2007) who posited that employer brand sums up all the key qualities that current and prospective employees identify with an employer and include economic (compensation and benefits), functional (learning of new skills), and psychological (sense of identity and status).

Literature also shows that employer brand relates to the position of an employer in the minds of employees, as a good place to work at (Minchington, 2010) and works out as a company's trade mark that is created by internal and external stakeholders through the dynamics between the company's identify, profile and image (Engelund & Buchhave, 2009). Employer branding therefore is the process of building the employer brand which includes every activity of the company that makes current and potential employees think that this company is a great

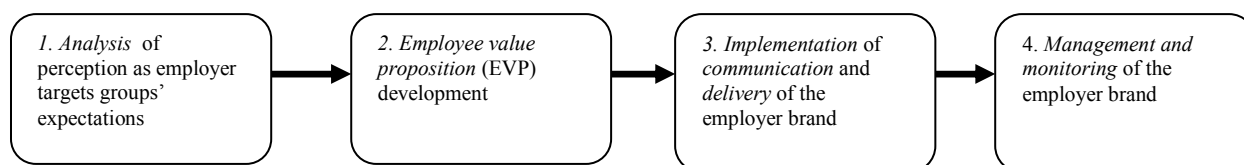
place to work (Knox & Freeman, 2006; Berthon et al, 2005; Tuzner & Yuksel, 2009; McLeod, 2013, Sluis, 2009).

Other authorities also define employer branding as the sum total of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective employees about the company as a desirable place to work at (Lloyd, 2002) with advertising being key to creating an employer brand that is differentiated and compelling (Berthon et al, 2005; Sherry, 2000). Employer branding therefore and according to Ewing et al (2002) is a process that is concerned with building a positive image of a company in the minds of current and potential employees that the company, above all others, is a great place to work at and is an employer of choice.

8.2. Strategic steps in developing and implementing employer branding

Literature shows that employer branding is a process (Target Training international (TTI), 2010; Berthon et al, 2005; Ewing et al, 2002). As a process, its development and implementation follows a four-stage process comprising analysis, employee value proposition, implementation and management and monitoring as shown in figure 1 below (Blackhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Tuzner & Yuksel, 2009).

Figure 1: Branding development and Implementation Process



Source: Blackhaus & Tikoo (2004)

Stage 1: Analysis of perceptions

This first stage involves the identification of relevant target groups for recruiting and analysing how the company is perceived as an employer by those target groups. Current employees should be part of the target groups as they are important ambassadors regarding employer brand (Berthon et al, 2005). This stage should also include the analysis of the main competitors' communication and industry perception.

Stage 2: Employee value proposition development

The employee value proposition or job offer should not be a slogan but should be a concise description of what a company does, how its stakeholders benefit from it and how it relates to the stakeholders (Blackhaus & Tikoo, 2004). It is a stage that should communicate what the company promises the prospective and current employees (its stakeholders) and forms the basis from which all company communication and delivery is developed (Ewing et al, 2002; Berthon et al, 2005). The finally developed EVP should consist of the following elements:

- *Company competencies:* What a company is good at or has to be good at;
- *Stakeholder benefits:* Stakeholder benefits the employer could focus on;
- *Company personality:* How a company relates to its stakeholders; and
- *Promise:* What stakeholders get when they relate with the company, what the stakeholders expect to experience (Berthon et al, 2005).

Stage 3: Implementation of employer branding

This stage focuses on two employer branding implementation dimensions namely:

- Implementation of the communication strategy. This relates to adapting communication towards the target groups to the EVP, and consistently upgrading communication tactics of both marketing and Human resources personnel; and
- Implementation of delivery to fulfill the promise given by the EVP (Berthon et al, 2005).

Stage 4: monitoring and managing the employer brand

The following actions are used for the monitoring and management of the employer brand (Ewing et al, 2002; Berton et al, 2005; Bergman & Armstrong, 2010):

- Monitoring and managing employer brand communication by developing a long term communications plan; monitoring the impact of the communications plan and defining key performance indicators; and adapting the communications plan to current changes in communication behaviour in the market; and
- Monitoring and managing employer brand delivery by defining key performance indicators, checking regularly the EVP and its fit with the target group preferences, and initiating re-development of the EVP if necessary, approximately after every five years.

8.3. Three key messages employer branding communicates

An effective and strong employer branding exercise should communicate the following messages to current and

prospective employees (Berthon et al, 2005; Ewing et al, 2002):

- Good brand reputation: That the company is a reputable brand is successful as an employer and is growth-oriented and popular;
- Career offer: The company offers challenging job opportunities, career development opportunities and good compensation; and
- Corporate culture: That the work environment is fair and open, non-hierarchical and inspiring.

The above messages are premised on the understanding that employer branding should be about telling current and prospective employees a good story about something about the company they otherwise may be hidden or take time for employees to discover (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Minchington, 2010; Mosley, 2007; Engelund & Buchhave, 2009).

8.4. The instrumental-symbolic attributes of employer branding

The image of the employer also referred to as the employer brand takes the assumption that the instrumental and symbolic attributes of the job play a major role in attracting and retaining talent in organisations (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Berton et al, 2005; Backhaus, & Tikoo, 2004; Kalaijan, 2011; Wilden et al, 2010). Instrumental or functional attributes of employer branding are viewed as concrete and factual aspects of a job offering such as salary and commission, and other monetary rewards as well as non-monetary benefits such as gym, insurance, medical care, size of the company, company location, that add to the status and feeling of satisfaction of the employee (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Symbolic attributes of a job offering can be categorised into five brand personality dimensions namely:

- *Sincerity*: Defines a workplace that is open, friendly and sincere, and where honesty is emphasised and practiced;
- *Excitement*: Defines a workplace where innovativeness and creativity are encouraged and valued;
- *Competence*: Defines a workplace where competencies are valued and rewarded;
- *Sophistication*: defines a workplace where the values of being trendy, classy and having a charming style are respected and appreciated; and
- *Ruggedness*: defines a workplace which is dynamic, performance-driven and result-oriented (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

8.5. Advantages of employer branding

There are a number of benefits of implementing employer branding in organisations such as Private higher education institutions. Among them are the following (Mosley, 2007; Ritson, 2002; Lloyd, 2002; Sherry, 2000; Collins & Stevens, 2002, Ewing et al, 2002):

- Enables companies to recruit and retain the best talent in the labour market;
- Help employers to build and sustain employment value propositions that are both differentiated and compelling;
- Enables the establishment and maintenance of a company culture that focuses on doing business the company way; and
- Acts as an important predictor of early decisions made by new recruits about their employer.

8.6. Employer branding strategies

Literature shows that employer branding is made up of a constellation of factors that contribute to an employee's experience inside a business and includes everything from the obvious (compensation and benefits) to the more subtle (status and satisfaction) that affect an employee's quality of life after hire (TTI, 2010). As a result, by using a variety of strategies, companies can strategically shape these factors to be able to effectively attract new employee and retain strong performers (TTI, 2010). The following therefore are strategies companies can use to enhance employer branding (TTI, 2010):

i. Developing a thoughtful recruitment strategy

The recruitment strategy includes job benchmarking and candidate behavioural and motivation assessments in tandem with a clearly articulated employer brand to create valuable career experience for a job applicant. Literature shows that recruitment processes that use assessments of prospective employees' strengths and potential areas for development are uplifting and satisfying to the new employee, and even candidates who do not even get the job offer will leave the company with valuable experience (TTI, 2010). Since prospective employees are considered as customers who spread information by word of mouth about the company brand, having during selection, interviewers who are inattentive, lack knowledge of the discipline, uncommunicative or downright rude have a serious negative effect on the image of a company as an employer of choice. Creating a bad impression to prospective employees during the selection process is considered one of the major reasons why companies need to examine the whole hiring process to ensure and assure that the process gives applicants an appreciation of what it would be like to work inside the company and also helps the company to shine as a positive experience during job hunt (TTI, 2010).

ii. Ensuring fit for the job

Research shows that momentum for retaining key staff begins when they are hired and potential loss of both talented employees and their productivity is minimised by using assessments that ensure that each employee is in the position that is the right fit for them (TTI, 2010). Assessment tools can be used by hiring managers to deploy employees in positions where they potentially have the biggest impact on the bottom line. Literature also shows that deploying employees into positions that best suit their unique set of skills and inclinations makes employees happier, more productive and hence most likely to stick around (TTI, 2010).

iii. Communication strategy

It is argued in literature that both current and prospective employees alike are now increasingly well-informed with regards to matters of employers and work environments (TTI, 2010). To effectively engage such prospective employees companies need to develop a communication strategy that market the company as an employer of choice to both current and prospective employees. In this regard, strategic deployment of digital technology tools such as websites, blogs, facebook, and twitter to complement traditional communication tools workshops, breakfast, television and print advertising is an important part of employer branding (TTI, 2010).

iv. Ensuring work-life balance

Research has shown that talented people want work-life balance as well as schedule flexibility to enable them to be both productive and to be prepared to stick around (TTI, 2010). It is also argued in literature that as part of employer branding, allowing employees some flexibility in choosing their work schedule makes an enormous impact on their quality of life (TTI, 2010). Research further shows that encouraging a wholesome lifestyle of employees by providing amenities such as staff canteen, worksite sport and exercise, discounted gym subscriptions etc, substantially contributes to employees' health while also strengthening the employer brand (TTI, 2010).

v. Periodically evaluating and upgrading the employee value proposition (EVP)

Research shows that a company's brand is owned in the public domain through how they perceive the brand and hence its control also rests with this domain. However companies can influence this perception by effectively communicating the facts about life outside the company and how employees feel about it (TTI, 2010).

vi. Demonstrating organisational values through concrete actions

Research shows that most companies have value statements that articulate wonderful organisational values meant to guide organisational activities (TTI, 2010). It is argued in literature that such values should not constitute an expanse of lofty text on notice boards and websites but should as part of employer branding:

- Help to create the company culture and act as the ground for decision making on employee attraction and retention matters; and
- Also act as a yardstick against which all employee decisions should be measured through their ability to succinctly articulate their company's values and also ensuring that their employees see them demonstrated in concrete actions of the employers (TTI, 2010).

vii. Encouraging and directly supporting professional development of employees

Literature shows that a lack of professional development is seen as a roadblock by most talent to their career growth that their performance warrants (TTI, 2010), and such employees will always look elsewhere for companies that offer professional development. As part of employer branding therefore, investing in employee professional development can be a very important tool for attracting and retaining talent in companies (TTI, 2010). Such professional development should help employees to feel that their employers value them and their future.

9. Methodology

9.1. Quantitative study

This study is an attempt at examining how employer branding is used as a tool for attracting and retaining talent in private higher education institutions in Botswana. As a result, a type of study that helps researchers to collect primary data from a large sample is seen as appropriate for this study hence the quantitative study was seen as relevant. This quantitative study allows researchers to perform statistical analysis for a more accurate interpretation of results.

9.2. Pilot testing

The research instrument was pilot- tested using three respondents, that is, one from each of the academic, administrative and support divisions. The purpose of the pilot test was to refine the questionnaire so that respondents would have no problems in answering the questions and also helps the researcher to refine data with respect to the procedures to be followed (Saunders, 2009; Yin, 2011).

9.3. Data collection

A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data. A structured questionnaire asks exactly the same questions of all informants, and in the same order, thus producing data that can be treated in the same way for all cases – converted into scores or categorized according to rules set out in a coding frame (Saunders, 2009). The

questionnaires were hand delivered to respondents and were given one week to complete, after which the researchers went back to the field to collect them.

9.4. Population and sampling

A population is a group of individuals, objects, or items from among which samples are taken for measurement (Saunders 2009). For this study, the population consisted of all professional staff members of the five PHEIs who include academic, administrative and support staff, who were located in Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana. On average, each institution employs about 150 employees, making the total population pegged at 750.

9.5. Sample size and Sampling Procedure

A sample is a segment of the population that is selected for investigation, and is the subset of the population (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This study employed proportional simple random sampling, respecting proportional gender. In determining the sample size, the following formula was used:

$$n = \frac{z^2(pq)}{e^2}$$

Where: n=sample size

z= standard error associated with the chosen level of confidence, measured at 95% level of confidence

p= estimated percent in the population

q= 100-p

e= acceptable sample error, estimated at 0,05%

Proportion of males in the population= 568/750, p= 0,7573

Proportion of females in the population= 182/750 q= 0,2427

The proportions for each of the 5 institutions were worked out as follows:

| Institution | Number of employees | Pi | ni | pi (males) | Pi (females) | nipi(males) | nipi (females) |
|--------------|---------------------|---------|---------|------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|
| 1 | 250 | 0,333 | 94,1343 | 0,804 | 0,196 | 76 | 18 |
| 2 | 50 | 0,06667 | 18,8269 | 0,76 | 0,24 | 14 | 5 |
| 3 | 100 | 0,13333 | 37,6537 | 0,62 | 0,38 | 23 | 14 |
| 4 | 300 | 0,40 | 112,961 | 0,7833 | 0,21667 | 88 | 24 |
| 5 | 50 | 0,06667 | 18,8269 | 0,64 | 0,36 | 12 | 7 |
| Total | 750 | | | | | | |

Therefore: Sample size

$$n = \frac{z^2(pq)}{e^2} \quad n = \frac{(1,96)^2 * (0,757) * (0,245)}{(0,05)^2} = 283$$

The sample size was supposed to be 283, but the researchers sampled 286, taking into consideration that some of the questionnaires could be discarded or not returned.

10. RESEARCH FINDINGS

10.1. Employer branding strategies

In terms of employer branding strategies used by PHEIs to attract talent, the following strategies are used: ensuring that the workplace is open, friendly and sincere where honesty is emphasized; values and rewards the competencies of employees; is dynamic, performance-driven and result-oriented; and has employee-friendly recruitment processes. Use of employer branding strategies as a way of attracting and retaining talent is also confirmed in literature by authorities such as Lievens & Highhouse (2003).

10.2. Employee perception of PHEIs as attractive workplaces

In terms of whether there is a relationship between biographical variables of employees and the way they perceive the impact of employer branding as enhancing the attractiveness of PHEIs as employment destinations, results were as shown below.

10.2.1. Age and employer branding

From figure 1, It can be observed that the age group between 31-40 years (which is the working age) considers employer branding to be important as a tool for attracting and retaining them in PHEIs and overall across the ages, about 61% of respondents feel employer branding is important when they consider applying for a job at their current place of work. The relationship between age and perception of employees on employer branding is also confirmed in figure 2 below.

Age and employer branding

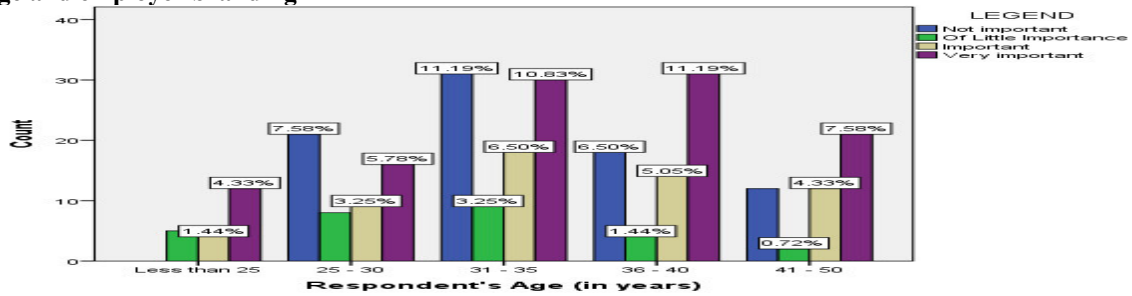


Figure 2: Average Respondent's Perception of the Importance of the Company as a Great Place to Work by Age

ii: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis:

H_0 : The respondent's age has no effect on their perception of the company as a great place to work

H_1 : The respondent's age has an effect on their perception of the company as a great place to work

Chi-square test statistics:

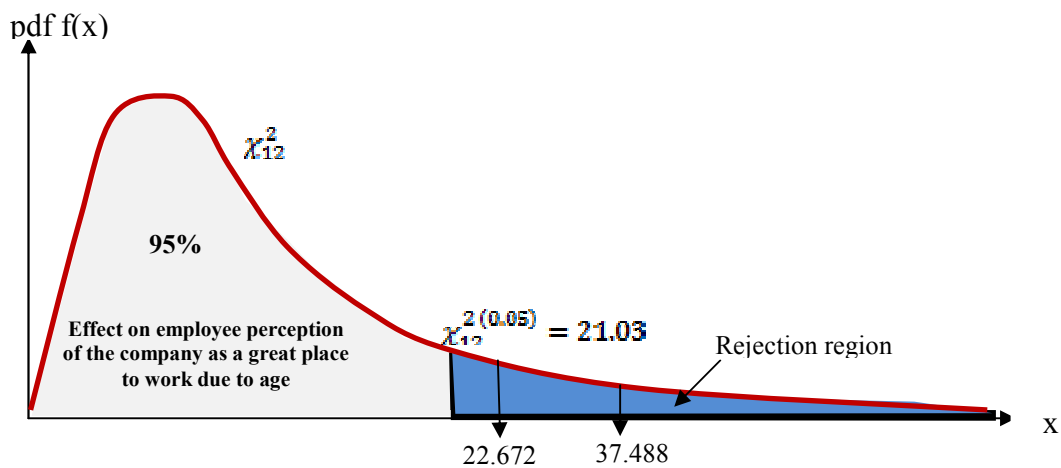


Figure 3: Chi-Square distribution due to age of respondents

Decision and conclusion:

From the above statistics, we observe that the observed Pearson Chi-Square values $\chi^2 \in \{37.488, 36.246, 25.241, 22.672\}$ are all greater than the tabulated chi-square value $\chi_{12}^{2(0.05)} = 21.03$ at 5% level of significance therefore we reject the null hypothesis. It can therefore be concluded with a 95% level of confidence that the respondent's age has an effect on employees' perception of the company as a great place to work.

10.2.2. Education and employer branding

On whether education has an effect on the respondent's perception of PHEIs as attractive places to work, figure 3 below shows that on average most respondents across educational levels are of the opinion that employer's branding practices are important when they consider applying for and staying at a job at their current place of work.

Education and employer branding:

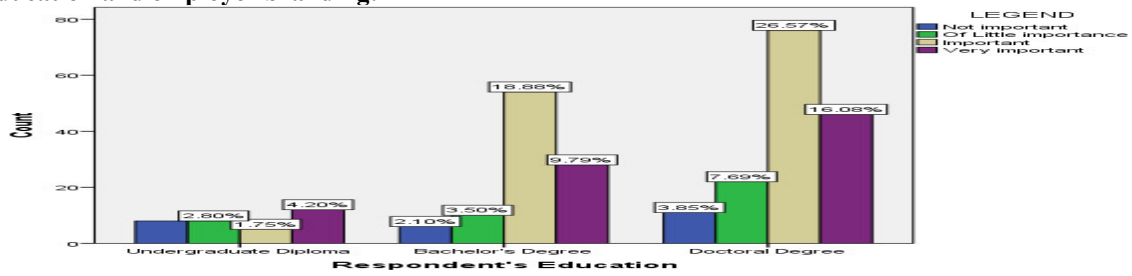


Figure 3: Average Respondent's Perception of the Importance of the Company as a Great Place to Work by Education

However, employees with higher qualifications perceive employer branding as more important in attracting and retaining them in PHEIs than employees with lower educational qualifications. The relationship between educational levels and how employees perceive employer branding is also confirmed in figure 4 below.

ii: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis:

H_0 : The respondent's Education has no effect on their perception of the company as a great place to work

H_1 : The respondent's Education has an effect on their perception of the company as a great place to work

Chi-square test statistics:

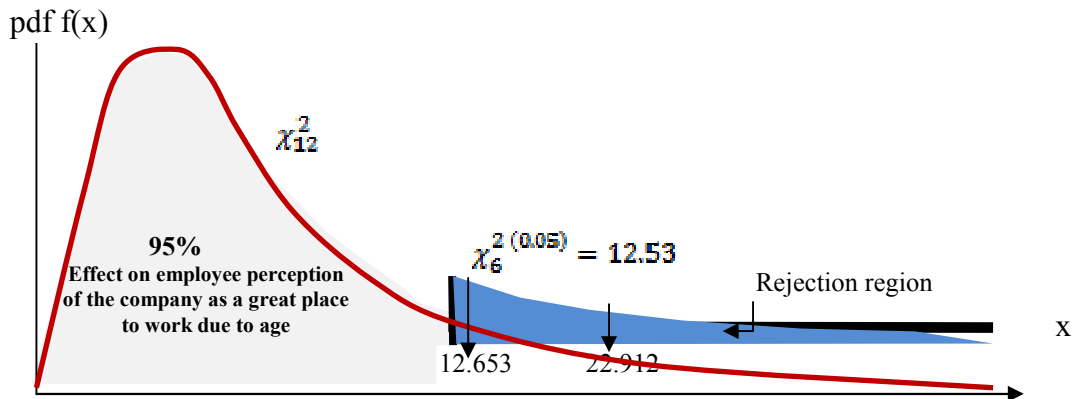


Figure 4: Chi-Square distribution due to educational background of respondents

Decision and conclusion:

From the above statistics, we observe that the observed Pearson Chi-Square values $\chi^2 \in \{12.653, 15.817, 20.939, 22.912\}$ are all less than the tabulated chi-square value $\chi_6^2(0.05) = 12.53$ at 5% level of significance therefore we reject the null hypothesis. It can therefore be concluded with a 95% level of confidence that the respondent's education level has an effect on employees' perception of the company as a great place to work.

10.3. Employee retention and biographical variables

This section related to whether variables such as age and education have an effect on an employee's intention to remain at the work place for long

10.3.1. Age and intention to stay at workplace

On whether age has an effect on how long employees would work in PHEIs before leaving, figure 5 below shows that on average the younger the respondent is the less demanding they are to employer's attraction techniques and hence tend to stay long at a place of employment. These results also dovetail with earlier results that showed that the older the employee the more demanding they are in terms of employer attractiveness and their willingness to be employed at places they do not feel attractive in terms of branding strategies mentioned above.

Age and intention to stay at the workplace

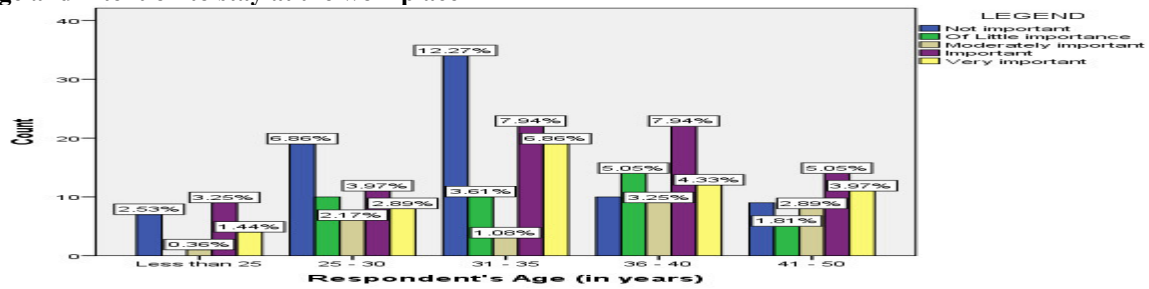


Figure 5: Average Respondent's Level of Attraction to the Company as a Great Place to Work by Age

The above results are further confirmed in figure 6 below through hypothesis testing.

ii: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis:

H_0 : The respondent's age has no effect on their level of attraction to the company as a great place to work

H_1 : The respondent's age has an effect on their level of attraction to the company as a great place to work

Chi-square test statistics:

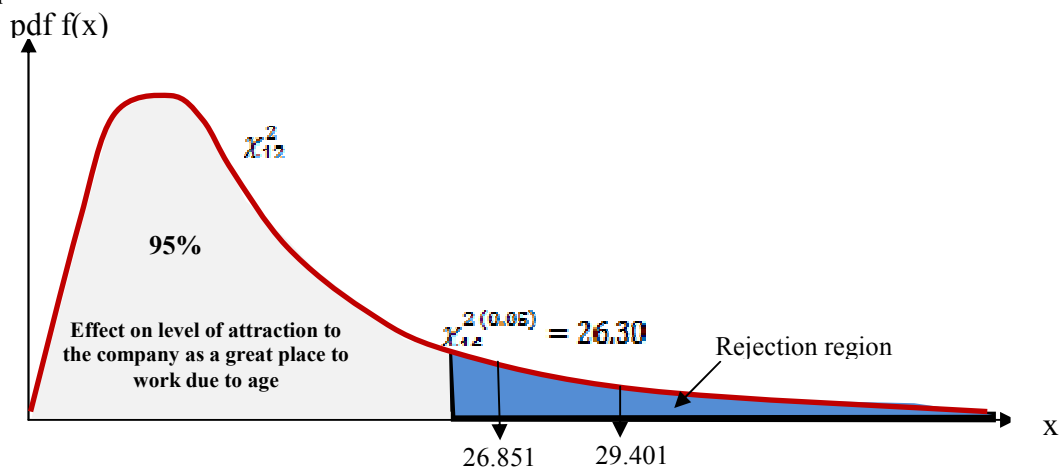


Figure 6: Chi-Square distribution due to age of respondents

Decision and conclusion:

From the above statistics, we observe that the observed Pearson Chi-Square values $\chi^2 \in \{26.851, 27.227, 28.051, 29.041\}$ are all less than the tabulated chi-square value $\chi_{12}^{2(0.05)} = 26.30$ at 5% level of significance therefore we reject the null hypothesis. We can therefore conclude with a 95% level of confidence that the respondent's age has an effect on how long employee will remain as employees in PHEIs.

10.3.2. Education and intention to stay in PHEIs

On whether an employee's education has an effect on the respondent's intention to remain at a work place, results in figure 7 below show that indeed the employee's educational level has a strong impact on his/her intention to remain at the current workplace.

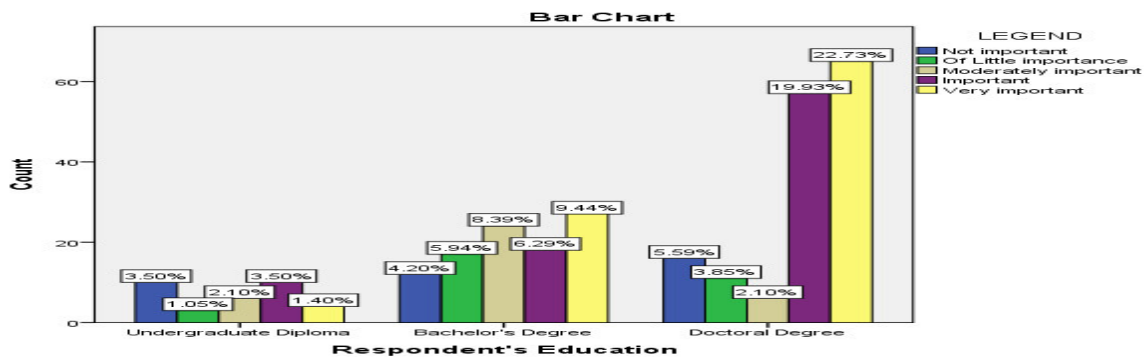


Figure 7: Average Respondent's intention to remain with the Company as a Great Place to Work by Education

The above results are also confirmed in figure 8 below through hypothesis testing.

ii: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis:

H_0 : The respondent's education has no effect on their intention to remain with the company

H_1 : The respondent's education has an effect on their intention to remain with the company

Chi-square test statistics:

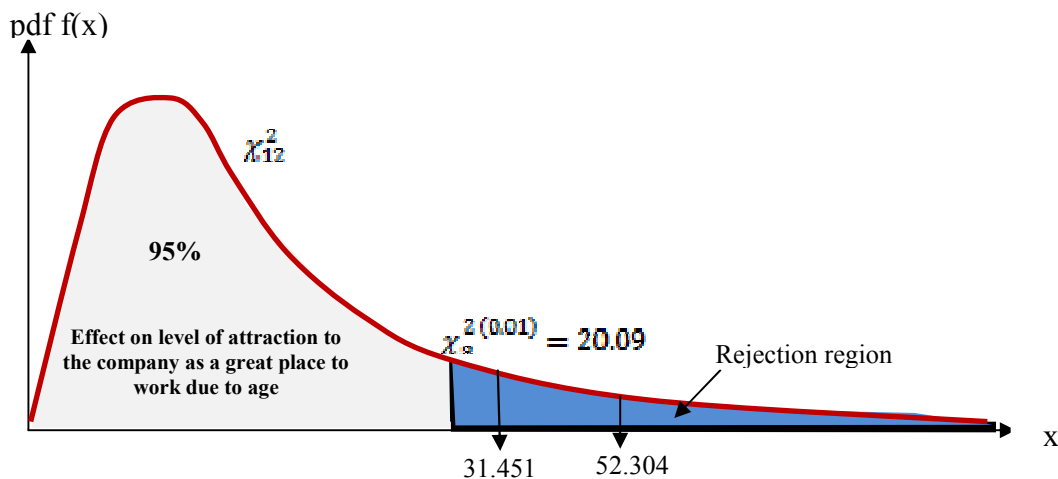


Figure 8: Chi-Square distribution due to education of respondents

Decision and conclusion:

From the above statistics, we observe that the observed Pearson Chi-Square values $\chi^2 \in \{31.451, 33.355, 51.088, 52.304\}$ are all less than the tabulated chi-square value $\chi^2_{(0.01)} = 20.09$ at 1% level of significance therefore we reject the null hypothesis. We can therefore conclude with a 99% level of confidence that the respondent's education has a very strong effect on their intention to remain with the company.

11. Conclusion and recommendations

This study therefore indicated two things:

Firstly we can justify the importance of the use of employer branding strategies/practices as key push or pull factors as far as the attraction and retention of employees in PHEIs is concerned. So a firm that strongly benefits by being cognisant of these.

Secondly, we have conclusively found that with the selected institutions that age and education has a very strong effect on the opinions of respondents with regards to how employees perceive the attractiveness of PHEIs as employment destinations. Of particular interest is the level of education as this factor can also be found to be important in recruitment. In light of this institutions need to be cognisant of what to do to both attract and retain talent in their organizations.

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